

# Arab Stereotypes in American Cinema over the Twentieth Century

An Honors Thesis, (Honrs 499)

By  
Rayna Roumie

Melvin Sharpe, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melvin R. Sharpe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'M'.

Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

May 2004

## Abstract

I developed my idea for this thesis while watching an old black and white movie with my father. The scene depicted Arab and Western men sitting around a boat deck and singing joyfully along to a drum beat. My father commented on how positively relations between Arabs and Westerners were portrayed in older films. This caused me to begin to wonder if indeed the depiction of Middle Easterners in American cinema today had become much more negative compared to films of past decades. I wondered if stereotypes found in American films today were mainly positive or negative. Were Arabs really portrayed so badly in the cinema as I had heard in various complaints? I wanted to find out for myself.

## **Arab Stereotypes in American Cinema Over the Twentieth Century**

I developed my idea for this thesis while watching an old black and white movie with my father. The scene depicted Arab and Western men sitting around a boat deck and singing joyfully along to a drum beat. My father commented on how positively relations between Arabs and Westerners were portrayed in older films. This caused me to begin to wonder if indeed the depiction of Middle Easterners in American cinema today had become much more negative compared to films of past decades. I wondered if stereotypes found in American films today were mainly positive or negative. Were Arabs really portrayed so badly in the cinema as I had heard in various complaints? I wanted to find out for myself.

I decided to review movies that had been widely viewed in the United States in order to evaluate the overall perspective to which American moviegoers were exposed, regarding Arabs in the cinema. I selected movies featuring characters of Arab decent that were popular with cinema audiences and proved to be high-yielding at the box office. As I began reviewing movies, the more I viewed, the more apparent it became that an increasing number of movies seemed to have very negative portrayals of Arabs. As well as being negatively portrayed, Arab characters also were very often one-dimensional. Such characters were often the stereotypical “crude, villain”, “oil-wealthy sheik” or “midriff bearing, harem woman”. As you read the various movie reviews I have chosen to include, notice recurring stereotypes in the different films.

““From the silent era to today the Arab image has stalked the silver screen as a metaphor for anti-Western values. The movie Arabs, and now the television Arabs, have appeared as lustful, criminal, and exotic villains or foils to Western heroes and heroines. They represent a religion, Islam, supposedly at war with Judaism and Christianity and a region at war with Western concepts of political economy and order...The movie and television Arabs tend no gardens, nurture no families. They live, rather, by the sword...” Woll & Miller, 1987 p.179” (*Kamalipour*, 187)

Jack Shaheen also states findings similar to that of Woll & Miller and to my own findings in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*. “From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy #1- brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural “others” bent on terrorizing civilized westerners, especially Christians and Jews.” (*Shaheen*, 2)

I watched various films and began to see the same stereotypes associated with Arabs in a number of these films. For this reason, I chose only a few representative films for extensive review in my thesis. I included both the best and worst film I had seen in terms of stereotyping. I also included one feature film length cartoon and a black and white movie.

### **Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves**

This was the first very positive portrayal of an Arab character that I had found while conducting my research. For this reason I chose to include *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* as one of the movies I discussed explicitly in this thesis. Robin Hood escapes from a Middle Eastern prison with the help of a kind Arab man named Azeem, played by

Morgan Freeman. Freeman's character asks Robin Hood to set him free and says that in return he will show him the way out of the prison. Robin Hood releases Azeem and saves him from certain death. Afterwards, Azeem vows to stay with Robin Hood until he is able to save his life in return.

Azeem is a devout Muslim and demonstrates that one can be an honest, courageous, and kind man and also follow the Muslim faith. Azeem is shown accurately following his faith by praying in the direction of Mecca and refusing alcohol as Islam suggests. Azeem's character also contradicts the common stereotypical depiction of the Muslim male chauvinist. When Robin picks mistletoe from a tree on their journey and says that he has won many women with the use of the plant, Azeem states, "In our country we talk to our women, we do not drug them with plants." He talks of women in high esteem throughout the movie.

## **Aladdin**

I chose to review Walt Disney's *Aladdin*, because of the impact it has had on young children. This is perhaps the first movie in which children are exposed to Arabs. *Aladdin* was extremely popular when it first came out in the cinema and so although I have not reviewed any other animated feature films; I felt this one was particularly significant.

Stereotypes are most engrained into our minds when we are exposed to them at a young age. It is often that which we grow up accepting that never changes in our minds, as we grow older. For this reason, stereotypes in films that young children watch are especially harmful to a population. "Such cartoon images are especially damaging

because children absorb most of their cultural values in their early years and television is the primary way they learn about Arabs. Once images of evil Arabs are learned, they are almost impossible to eradicate.”(Kamalipour 124) *Aladdin* was Perhaps the most influential film length, children’s cartoon that appeared in the United States in my generation. I watched *Aladdin* again, as an adult, in order to reexamine any stereotypes present that may have eluded me as a child.

The film begins with a song talking about a far away place with harsh landscapes. It says, “I come from a land, from a far away place...its barbaric, but hey, its home.” The first character we are introduced to is a dishonest Arab salesman, trying to sell the audience junk. He tries to persuade you to buy a “combination hookah and coffee maker” as well as some “dead sea Tupperware”, both of which are defective. Finally, the salesman pulls Aladdin’s famous lamp out of his stash and we begin to hear the story behind it.

In the next scene, we meet Jafar. Jafar is the evil advisor to the King. Immediately we know he is a “bad guy” by his arrogant tone and long black attire. Jafar is meeting with Gazeem, a thug he hired to find a magical scarab that opens the cave of wonders. The thug says, “I had to slit a few throats but then I had it.” A magical cave arises out of the desert dunes, as Gazeem exclaims, “By Allah!” Notice the linking of Islam to negative characteristics. Still we have yet to meet an honest character in the film.

In the next scene, we meet Aladdin, as he is attempting to steal a loaf of bread from a street vendor. He is chased through the market place by a group of barbaric looking palace guards. Their leader is overweight and has missing teeth. He yells to

Aladdin, "I'll have your hands for a trophy, street rat." We are faced with the common stereotype of the Arab as an uncivilized, barbarian. As Aladdin runs through the market place, he comes across a number of very stereotypical Arab market people. We see snake charmers and sword swallows. Aladdin even runs through a room of scantily clad, harem-style women. Finally Aladdin sits down to eat and sees two small children sifting through the trash in an attempt to find food. He shows compassion as he gives up his hard-earned meal to the two young children. Later Aladdin helps these children again when he sees them in the market place. The younger child runs in front of a suitor for the princess who happens to be traveling through the marketplace on horseback. His older sister runs out into the street to save him and they cross paths with the suitor. The suitor raises his whip at the children, but Aladdin intervenes just in time to save them.

We then meet the princess and her father the King. Both are kind-hearted characters but, like Aladdin, have their flaws. Aladdin has a good heart although he steals to earn a living, even though he is quite able-bodied. The King and the princess, Jasmine, are seen arguing about whom she is to marry. She does not like any of the suitors that are presented to her and so the King is becoming frustrated. In a fit of anger, he exclaims, "Allah forbid you should have any daughters." This fits with the stereotype of women in the Arab world being viewed as objects, something to be married off. Jasmine's being forced into marriage is a common theme among the media depiction of Arabs. Later we learn that Jafar often hypnotizes the King so that he will do his bidding. Although the King only seems to want the best for his daughter, his portrayal is far from that of a competent leader.

Throughout the film, the only characters with positive morals seem to be Aladdin, Jasmine and the King. Jasmine's pet tiger and Aladdin's monkey and flying carpet, as well as the Genie are characters that also display positive qualities, but will not be considered, as they are not human. Although as a viewer, we side with these characters, they too each have negative qualities. Aladdin steals to live, the King is easily persuaded and incompetent and Jasmine also shows dishonesty as she runs away and does not reveal to Aladdin her true identity. The land over which the King rules is portrayed on the whole as being unruly and disorderly. Most all of the minor characters are rude, dishonest and devoid of any kind of morals. We are given a very stereotypical depiction of a barbaric and uncivilized Arab nation.

By the end of the story, Aladdin and Jasmine succeed in moving the King from siding with Jafar, to seeing things from their perspective. The King changes the laws and allows the princess to marry whom ever she pleases. Here, the values have changed from that of Middle Eastern society to a more Westernized point of view. "Aladdin's triumph over Jafar represents to children the idea that American cultural values are superior to Middle Eastern cultural values. In fact, in the destruction of the old city, which had apparently been under some "evil spell," children view the representative displacement of an older society with a more modern and Westernized one." (Kamalipour 217) Although *Aladdin* does not overtly insult Arabs, I would not wish this to be the only movie depicting Arabs that a child was exposed to at a young age.



## **The Spy Who Loved Me**

*The Spy Who Loved Me*, a 1970's James Bond movie, starring Roger Moore involves a Russian female spy and James Bond who goes to Cairo in attempts to track down a lead on a lost submarine. We are presented with Arabs and life in the Middle East through the eyes of the British agent, Bond, otherwise known as 007. James Bond's character has been extremely popular over the years with movie goers, and so I felt a Bond movie would play a particularly significant role in influencing the stereotypes that an audience may hold. I took the popularity of the hero into account when deciding to include this film for review. Similar statements could be made for a film hero such as Indiana Jones, who also stars in a movie involving Arabs and a Middle Eastern setting.

We begin the first scene in Cairo with Bond arriving in the desert on camel and dressed in traditional Middle Eastern attire. He speaks a few words in Arabic, thanking some of the locals who help him with his camel. They in turn politely respond with "your welcome". Bond then enters a tent where he sees the man with whom he is planning on meeting. They sit down inside the tent and begin small talk. The man asks Bond, "What can I offer you, sheep's eyes, dates, vodka martini?" Scantly clad Arab women enter the room and begin serving them. The men do not take their eyes off these women. Once again we see the harem woman stereotype appearing in film. The man asks Bond if he can persuade him to "accept a bed for the night". James Bond begins to refuse at first, but then the host snaps his fingers and a beautiful girl wearing very little appears and kneels on the floor beside Bond. The viewer can see that the girl is very willing to persuade Bond to stay the night, and so he agrees.

The next scene opens up with the call to prayer and a silhouette of a mosque's minaret in the background. James Bond goes to see a man by the name of Mr. Fekish at his home. His home is a beautiful, traditional looking Middle Eastern house complete with a courtyard and fountain. He is greeted by a presumably Arab woman, who tells him that Mr. Fekish is otherwise occupied, and that she must keep him company in the mean time. She is dressed in a traditional Arab nightgown but has blonde hair and no apparent Middle Eastern accent. The woman asks Bond if there is anything at all that he would like. Bond smoothly replies saying that he had lunch, but had missed desert. They begin to embrace, when a sniper shoots the woman in the back and Bond runs after him. Once again the Arab woman is seen in the stereotypically subservient, harem-girl role. Although, it must be said that James Bond movies typically depict women as subservient to men, particularly Bond himself, in various ways. Regardless, this movie does serve to portray the harem woman stereotype.

Later Bond enters a club where he mingles with a number of people, some being Arabs. Once again the setting is depicted as being exotic and romantic. Lively music plays in the background as dancers twirl around on the dance floor, flipping their hair from side to side. On the whole, the Middle Eastern characters are only seen in the backgrounds as menial laborers or other minor roles. Most of the action in Cairo takes place between Bond, the Russian spy, and an evil character by the name of Jaws. The Russian spy and Bond meet with a local man and attempt to bid for a microfilm that may help them in their investigations. This man is shown only briefly and seems extremely untrustworthy. Once again we see the stereotypical slick-dealing Arab who is not to be trusted.

## The Siege

I chose to include *The Siege* amongst my reviews because it was different than many of the movies I had watched. *The Siege* presented both positive and negative Arab characters, though on the whole we were mainly presented with the typical stereotypes. In *The Siege*, viewers are exposed to the stereotype of the Arab terrorist and religious fanatic.

*The Siege* contains numerous accounts of Arabs killing innocent people in acts of terror. The stereotyped “Arab terrorist” is most defiantly a major part of this film. Arab terrorist groups are shown blowing up a bus, bombing a theater on Broadway and the FBI building, and holding a classroom of children hostage. Other mentions are made of various additional acts of terror performed by Arabs or Arab Americans.

The film begins with flashes between a Middle Eastern man with a turban escaping through the desert, and President Clinton making a speech. Clinton says, “The cowards who committed these murderous acts must not go unpunished.” We know from the juxtaposition that he is referring to the man escaping in his Mercedes through the desert. We then see this man being captured. The movie upholds a common stereotype of the Arab as a terrorist, being brought to justice by the President of the United States. The next scene shows a bearded Arab man humming and playing with the traditional worry beads. We are then shown men praying with the sound of the call to prayer ringing in the background. As the camera moves further away, we realize that the scene does not take place in the Middle East, but is instead situated in Brooklyn. We are hinted at one of the subplots of the film; Arab Americans dealing with the current political events. I feel

that the addition of a traditional Islamic scene following directly after the depiction of acts of terrorism serves to tie the Islamic faith to murderous acts. In my opinion, this leads to negative connotations of Islam with viewers. By indicating that the mosque is in fact located in the United States, this gives the possibility that such acts of terrorism could be caused by Arab Americans or Arabs in the United States. Later in the film, this theme is expanded upon as thousands of Arab immigrants are locked up behind barbed wire.

Arabs appear in the film through various suspects, immigrants to Brooklyn, an FBI agent and terrorists. A number of suspects are investigated, and some found guilty. One man, by the name of Tareq Hussein, is unjustly tortured and killed by Bruce Willis' character who plays the military commander.

A member of the FBI, named Frank Haddad (Tony Shalhoub), is an American citizen who was born in Lebanon and is a practicing Shiite Muslim. He is shown as a compassionate family-orientated man out to stop terrorist activities. "He is located within a much larger immigrant community, people who have made the United States their home, and the film explores this community fondly and in some detail...But somewhere in that world, the terrorists are hiding, waiting to carry out another in the series of bombings. The terrorists are not immigrants but wayfarers, whose primary identity is with the political struggles involving the United States and Arabs in the Middle East." (McAlister 262) I do feel that Haddad was a positive addition to the movie, but at the same time, I felt that he was depicted as the minority. Almost all of the other Arab characters are violent criminals. Haddad's character may serve to give the audience the opinion that not all Arabs are terrorists, or might merely reinforce ideas which some

viewers may possibly already hold; that most all Arabs are violent, religious fanatics and terrorists, with one or two minor exceptions. The FBI agent is the only “good” Arab in the movie, which I feel, hardly makes up for the numerous acts of terror committed by Arabs along with various racial slurs used. “Arab immigrants along with Arab-American auto mechanics, university students, and a college teacher terrorize and kill more than 700 New Yorkers.” (Shaheen 430)

A man by the name of Samir is also a major character in *The Siege*, and is of Middle Eastern decent. He is a Palestinian immigrant who teaches Middle Eastern studies at a college in Brooklyn. Up until the end of the movie, we believe he is helping the CIA agent played by Annette Benning. In one of the last scenes, we see that he himself is the “last cell” of terrorists that they were looking for when he pulls out a gun and begins to strap an explosive to his back. Samir’s performing of the Islamic prayer and its ritual washing, immediately precedes his attempt to bomb innocent people. I found it especially offensive when the main Muslim terrorist, Samir, prayed and then proceeded very nonchalantly to attempt to blow up innocent people. This fits with the stereotyping of Arabs as religious fanatics and terrorists. Luckily, Denzel’s character arrives just in time to stop Samir from using the bomb. The CIA agent is killed in the process. Samir is the only character besides Frank who was thought to be a “good” Arab, but in fact, he turns out to be a terrorist. What kind of message does this send to viewers?

I was surprised to see a “relatively sympathetic portrayal of the motivations of the bombers” (McAlister 262) compared to other films. We hear Samir’s side of the story when we believe him to be working to help the CIA agent. We find out that his brother had lived in a Palestinian refugee camp until he couldn’t take it any longer, and someone

told him “to die for Allah is beautiful” and so he became a suicide bomber. Samir recounts the tale to the CIA agent and we see sorrow wash over his face. This serves to reinforce the stereotypical idea of all Arabs being terrorists.

We are taken deep into the struggle of Arab Americans in this film as Frank’s son is taken to a concentration camp. After several terrorist attacks on Brooklyn, the army commander heads an operation where the city is put under martial law and every Arab American male who fits the profile is taken into custody and detained for questioning. Many of the city’s young Middle Eastern males are put in concentration camps, including Frank Jr.. Frank Sr. is outraged by the fact that his son was taken from his home, while they are American citizens who have lived alongside everyone else for decades. He himself has worked to hunt down terrorists with Denzel’s character. He throws down his badge and says, “I’m not your sand-nigger any more.” Later, Denzel’s character visits Frank and convinces him to return to the FBI and continue fighting terrorism. He agrees as he takes back his badge.

An interesting aspect of this film is that it also takes into account the role media plays in such political events. This is another aspect that I had not yet seen examined in any previous films that I had reviewed up until this point. The story begins with President Clinton speaking as though through a television broadcast. Later, at different times during the film, we hear a jumble of voices with mixed messages, as if they are the sounds of various radio and television stations. I heard such racial slurs as “towel heads” followed such positive statements of how the Muslim religion advocates peace, while also mixing in reports of the vandalizing of Arab owned shops. The consequences of such mixed media messages are questionable. “The Siege tells is story of race, terrorism,

and desire through complex layers of representation; images from television news and the surveillance operations of various security forces structure both the form and the content of the film narrative... While the movie is about terrorism in New York, and secondarily about the problem of race and national identity, it is also a movie about television- particularly television news. These levels of narrative reinforce each other, drawing on the complex ways that terrorism, race, television, and the Middle East had long been linked in U.S. discourse.” (McAlister 260)

This film was different than others I had watched in a number of ways, but I still feel that some underlying stereotypes and representations do not allow Middle Eastern people to be seen in a completely realistic light. I found that this film drew a line between Arabs who were U.S. citizens and those who were not immigrants, who played the “bad Arabs”. Even some of these U.S. citizens were portrayed as being terrorists. I felt the film subconsciously said that if a Middle Eastern person accepts Western culture, and the American way of life, they can then be held in higher esteem, as a U.S. citizen, while their own culture is somehow less valuable. There was not a single non-U.S. citizen in the film who was not portrayed as an evil terrorist.

Jack Shaheen tells of peoples’ responses to the movie *The Siege*. Many Arab Americans and concerned Muslims voiced their opinion against the damage that could be caused by such negative portrayals of Arabs. “Concerned that some viewers might perceive *The Siege* as fact, not fiction America’s Islamic communities opened their mosques to those wanting to learn the truth about Islam. While most people were sympathetic, some moviegoers responded with foul language, or even more. Outside one

theater, Yama Niazi, president of the Islamic Society of Santa Barbara, observed a young Muslim woman passing out leaflets about Islam- a passerby spit on her.” (433)

### **Not Without My Daughter**

I chose to include *Not without My Daughter* even though the plot revolves around an American woman in Iran for the reason that Persians are often mistaken as being Arabs. The family is Islamic which is also often confused as being one and the same with being of Middle Eastern origin. Many stereotypes presented in *Not without My Daughter* may also lead to a misrepresentation of Arabs by uninformed viewers.

The movie starts out displaying a family living in America. Sally Fields stars as the mother, Betty, who is married to an Iranian husband. They seem to be a happy family until the husband is shown being tormented at work because of his ethnicity. He works in a hospital, where other surgeons make fun of his language and say that they do not understand why he came to the United States when in Iran one can get a doctors license in two weeks. The husband is later shown getting pressured by his family in Iran to come for a visit. Fields' character is reluctant at first but then give in to her husband's wish to travel to Iran, after he promises to stay only for a short visit. He swears on the Holy Qur'an that the family will return after two weeks.

The viewers see life in Iran from Betty's perspective. She is startled by the crowd of relatives who gather to meet them at the airport. She is later obviously appalled at the tradition of stepping over a slaughtered goat in honor of her arrival. . A man with a machine gun runs up to her and urges her to cover her hair with a scarf. Afterwards, one



of her brother-in-laws says that, “Every single hair that is not covered is like a dagger aimed at the heart of our martyrs.” Later, her husband tries to explain life in Iran saying, “It is all back to the Qur’an...” She says that life seems so “primitive” to her, a sentiment that is repeated several times throughout the film. The next morning Betty tries to persuade her husband not to go to prayer.

As the film progresses, Betty realizes that her husband has lied to her and plans to stay in Iran. When she tries to leave he holds her hostage with the help of his family. Finally Betty manages to escape with her daughter by traveling through the desert. She is nearly raped in the process, but makes it safely to an American embassy where we see the stars and stripes emerge triumphantly from behind a tree. We know Betty and her daughter are going back to the United States.

This movie serves to tie Islam to negative stereotypes. The movie stereotypes non-Western cultures as primitive and uncivilized. Most all of the men in the movie are chauvinistic, and the women subservient to their husbands. The family violently imposes their will upon Betty. Betty seems to represent the West and a Western set of values, while her husband and his family are shown to represent Persian culture. Western values ultimately triumph over the East. Although there are a few characters who share different moral values, they are the exception. I do not feel this movie could truly represent any group of people whether it is Persians or Arabs.

### **The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad**

*The Naked Gun* was a popular comedy starring Leslie Nielsen. The movie first came out in the 1980’s, followed by a number of sequels. I chose to include this film

because it is similar to a number of spoofs that ridicule Arabs. The first scene satirically portrayed Arab and other world leaders in a meeting in Beirut, Lebanon. We hear the call to prayer and see militant men patrolling by a mosque and a group of camels. The setting is similar to many used in movies to portray some Middle Eastern city. Notice the mosque, serving to tie Islam to being Arab and to political activities.

We enter the building, where the leaders are holding their meeting. They are arguing chaotically about fate of America. Someone says, "Listen to me, killing a few hostages is not sufficient, the Americans must be made to suffer...humiliate them." Another says, "We must conceive at least one terrorist act." The Arab is stereotyped as a terrorist once again. One of the Arabs offers, "I say wipe out Washington and New York." Leslie Nielsen then discards his disguise and effortlessly beats up the leaders saying, "Don't ever let me catch you guys in America." Once again this film portrays Arabs as terrorists bent on destroying the United States. *The Naked Gun* also links Islam to with terrorism and un-Islamic practices.

### **The Sheik**

*The Sheik* is a black and white movie, which gained popularity in the 1920's. This may have been many people's first impression of Arabs in the cinema. I chose to include this movie in my review as it demonstrates that stereotypes similar to those found in today's films were in place decades ago. It is a film about a British woman who is captured by an Arab Sheik. Eventually, the two fall in love and it is revealed that the Sheik is not really of Arab heritage.

I was surprised at the way Arabs were portrayed in *The Sheik*. I had imagined that since this was an older movie, some of today's stereotypes would not have been present. Instead, I saw a similar treatment of Arabs in this movie as I had seen in many of today's films. One of the first messages that appeared on the screen said, "Where the children of Araby dwell in happy ignorance that civilization has passed them by." The idea that Arabs were a barbaric and uncivilized group of people was a common stereotype I had seen recurrent in many of the films. Another common stereotype depicted was that Arab men treated women as objects and that their women were completely subservient to the men. We are told of a marketplace where brides are sold. A message describes the scene saying, "[the women are] on the way to the harems of the rich merchants, to obey and serve like chattel slaves." Later in the movie, the Sheik makes the statement, "When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her!" Arab men are shown kidnapping and attempting to rape the heroine. Once again I see Arab characters depicted as immoral villains.

Only after the audience finds out that the Sheik, Ahmed, is in fact not really an Arab, does the heroine agree to his advances. She makes the statement, "His hand is so large for an Arab." "(Note: How small or large should an Arab's hand be?)" (Shaheen 424) The reply comes, "He is not an Arab. His father was an Englishman, his mother a Spaniard." Shaheen makes an interesting comment upon this fact in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*. "Consider The Sheik's impact on Arab audiences. No Arab heroes appear...Consider how American audiences might react if an Egyptian filmmaker produced *The American Cowboy*, a movie adapted from a Korean novel. Would audiences be pleased to see the cowboy hero being portrayed by a Bulgarian? Would they

applaud if the film's cowboy champion turned out to be not an American, but a Romanian Earl in disguise?" (424)

## **Navy Seals**

In terms of defiling an entire race of people, I felt this movie was probably one of the worst I had seen. For this reason I chose to review it in order to show one extreme. I would say that *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* lies at the other end of this extreme.

Navy Seals begins depicting Arabs as a band of terrorists brutally murdering American military men. The Arab leader heartlessly says, "Get rid of them", referring to the Americans. The Navy Seals arrive to save the day. One of them says, "Gonna smoke this piece of shit right here", after an unarmed man claims to be an Egyptian sailor. The Seal says, "Egyptian Sailor my ass" and later it turns out that the man is a terrorist. In the next scene a Navy Seals says that he "vaporized [them]". These are just a few of many such lines used in reference to an Arab character. Language used to describe Arabs in the movie includes but is not limited to, "Cheese dicks", "Rags", "Rag-heads", "Assholes", "Terrorists" and the racial slur, "Ay-rabs".

One scene depicts a female journalist who is half Lebanese having dinner with a friend of the character played by Charlie Sheen. I found this scene particularly odious for a number of reasons. The character played by Charlie Sheen arrives and hears that the journalist specializes in Middle Eastern news, and is situated in Beirut. Sheen's character describes Beirut saying, "What a shit-hole." She asks if he has been there. He describes the city saying, "Rags knocking each other off like the national pastime." The journalist

questions, “Rags?” and he answers, “Rag-heads, Ay-rabs. They’re all a few sandwiches shy of a picnic.” She says that she is “half rag, herself” and then soon shrugs off his comments and has dinner with him smiling.

\*\*\*\*\*

I began to wonder why the movies all shared such similar stereotypes. Obviously different producers, writers and directors were responsible for producing the various films reviewed. Woll and Miller have offered reasons for the stereotyping of Middle Easterners. They claim that the stereotypes present in cinema today arise out of personal stereotypical ideas that date back thousands of years. Such stereotypes “derive from cultural traditions dating back to the Middle Ages, when the expansion of Islam into Europe pitted Arab against European, leading to Western cultural and political efforts to discredit Arab/Islam culture.” (Kamalipour 189) Edward Said was known for his theory on what he termed, “Orientalism”. This is a similar idea pointing out the reasons for distorted views of Eastern cultures by the West. Said states that his idea of Orientalism was developed “initially as a means of seeing to the maintenance of European empires...The West was viewed as being rational, civilized, developed, humane, and superior while the Orient was viewed as undeveloped, inferior, irrational, and a source of crime, chaos, violence, and corruption- all differences, Said suggests, that point to a fundamental perception of distinctions between master and subject races.” (Denton 242)

I also feel that since this stereotype seems to be firmly in place, it would be quite easy to use it to ones advantage when making a film. “The main point of Middle Easterner bashing, quite obviously, is framing the population as the enemy so that the United States emerges as the hero.” (Kamalipour 191) I often felt while watching the

movies, that stereotypes such as the Middle Eastern “terrorist” were used to the advantage of filmmakers to unite the audience and the heroes or heroines against this evil “other”. For example, as I was watching *Swordfish*, starring John Travolta and Halley Berry I saw this technique employed. A ‘bad guy’ played by Travolta, was instantly transformed into a ‘good guy’ when it was revealed that the money he had illegally obtained was intended for use against a terrorist group, with a leader whose name was clearly of Arab origin.

After conducting my research, I found that many movies seemed to link being Arab with the Muslim faith. While there are many Muslim Arabs, there are also many Arabs who practice a variety of other religions. I came across what I felt to be a little known fact to most Americans. “Only 12 percent of the world’s Muslims are Arab. Yet moviemakers ignore this reality, depicting Arabs and Muslims as one and the same people.” (*Shaheen*, 4) Not only are Arabs often depicted as Muslim, but the Islamic faith is also often portrayed in a negative light. “Today’s image makers regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror, depicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders, and as lecherous, oily sheikhs, intent on using nuclear weapons.”(*Shaheen*, 9) The word “Allah” was often referred to in a number of the movies by both Arab and Western characters. Filmmakers rarely, if ever, made it apparent that “Allah” is the Arabic language word for God that both Christian and Muslim Arabs use to refer to their Lord. (*Shaheen*, 11) Instead these films “mislead viewers, wrongly implying that devout Arab Muslims do not worship the “true God” of the Christians and Jews, but some tribal deity.”(*Shaheen*, 11)

Many American viewers are not aware of what it means to be of Arab heritage. Many moviegoers often mistake Iranians or Indians for Arabs, while both are completely different groups of people. Although Iranians are Persians, many moviegoers cannot make this distinction, and so stereotypes presented by Iranian characters also serve to shape the way Arabs are viewed by the cinema audience. For this reason, I chose to include *Not Without My Daughter*, a movie starring Sally Field, in my analysis.

Jack Shaheen talks of an Arab-American college student in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*. The student says, “The most common questions I was asked [by classmates] were if I had ever ridden a camel or if my family lived in tents.”(7) I immediately empathized with the student, for I myself had been asked both of the same questions on various occasions when I initially moved to the United States a year before starting college. I felt such questions serve to demonstrate the lack of understanding of Middle Eastern life and culture in the United States. A vast majority of Americans do not speak Arabic. Most have probably not been to the Middle East, unless on duty for the military. If people have nothing else to go by except for what they view in the cinema or on television, what kind of images are we presenting of an entire race?

Many of the same stereotypes were repeated over and over in different films which were shown in cinemas over various decades. I argue that repetition of negative stereotypes of this kind cannot be the making for a positive view of Middle Easterners or Arab Americans. “When a mass audience is dependent on media information for its portraits of the world, the potential exists for selectively skewing those portraits in political or ideological directions.” (Denton 236)

I found during my research that a large number of the films with Arab characters display negative stereotypes that serves to present a distorted picture of an entire population. While many other groups have been presented negatively in American cinema over the last century, most have declined drastically in past decades. Unfortunately, negative Arab stereotypes have not seen any such decline. Shaheen points out that “it is acceptable to advance anti-Semitism in film- provided the Semites are Arabs...Many of the anti-Semitic films directed against Arabs were released in the last third of the twentieth century, at a time when Hollywood was steadily and increasingly eliminating stereotypical portraits of other groups.” (Shaheen 6)



## Works Cited

Aladdin. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Perf. Scott Weinger, Robin Williams and Linda Larkin. Walt Disney Pictures, 1992.

Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery. Dir. Jay Roach. Perf. Mike Myers, Elizabeth Hurley, and Seth Green. New Line Cinema, 1997.

Back to the Future. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson and Crispin Glover. Universal Pictures, 1985.

Black Sunday. Dir. John Frankenheimer. Perf. Robert Shaw, Bruce Dern and Marthe Keller. Paramount Pictures, 1977.

Delta Force, The. Dir. Menahem Golan. Perf. Chuck Norris, Lee Marvin, Martin Balsam and Joey Bishop. Cannon Film, 1986.

Denton, Robert E., Jr., ed. The Media and the Persian Gulf War. Westport: London, 1993.

Die Hard. Dir. John McTiernan. Perf. Bruce Willis, Alan Rickman, Bonnie Bedelia, and Reginald VelJohnson. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1988.

Internet Movie Database. 1990-2004, Amazon Co. <<http://imdb.com>>

Kamalipour, Yahyar R., ed. The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception. Westport: Greenwood, 1995.

Lawrence of Arabia. Dir. David Lean. Perf. Peter O'Toole, Alec Guinness, Anthony Quinn, Jack Hawkins, and Omar Sharif. Columbia Pictures, 1962.

McAlister, Melani. Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001.

Morocco. Dir. Josef Von Sternberg. Perf. Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich. Paramount Publix Corp., 1930.

Mummy, The. Dir. Stephen Sommers. Perf. Brendan Fraser, Rachel Weisz, John Hannah and Arnold Vosloo. Universal Pictures, 1999.

Murder on the Orient Express. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Perf. Albert Finney, Lauren Bacall and Martin Balsam. Paramount Pictures, 1974.

Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!, The. Dir. David Zucker. Perf. Leslie Nielsen, Priscilla Presley, Ricardo Montalban, George Kennedy and O.J. Simpson. Paramount Pictures, 1988.

Navy SEALs. Dir. Lewis Teague. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Michael Biehn, Joanne Whalley and Rick Rossovich. Orion Pictures, 1990.

Not Without My Daughter. Dir. Brian Gilbert. Perf. Sally Field, Alfred Molina, Sheila Rosenthal and Roshan Seth. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

Raiders of the Lost Ark. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Harrison Ford, Karen Allen, Paul Freeman and Ronald Lacey. Paramount Pictures, 1981.

Shaheen, Jack G. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. New York: Olive Branch P, 2001.

Sheik, The. Dir. George Melford. Perf. Rudolph Valentino, Agnes Ayres, Patsy Ruth Miller and George Waggner. Paramount Pictures, 1921.

Siege, The. Dir. Edward Zwick. Perf. Denzel Washington, Annette Bening, Bruce Willis, Tony Shalhoub and Sami Bouajila. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1998.

Spy Who Loved Me, The. Dir. Lewis Gilbert. Perf. Roger Moore, Barbara Bach, and Curd Jurgens. United Artists, 1977.

Swordfish. Dir. Dominic Sena. Perf. John Travolta, Hugh Jackman, and Halle Berry. Warner Bros., 2001.

True Lies. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jamie Lee Curtis, Tom Arnold, Bill Paxton and Tia Carrere. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1994.